University of Alberta

Playing Reel to Real:

Martin McDonagh Breaks with Convention in *The Leenane Trilogy*

by

Kyna Hamill

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

Department of Drama

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is an examination of Martin McDonagh's *The Leenane Trilogy*, which includes, *The Beauty Queen of Leenane, A Skull in Connemara* and *The Lonesome West*. As one of the only critical examinations into his work to date, this is an overview of his influences and accomplishments from the beginning of his playwriting career until March 1999. Each play is looked at separately in terms of McDonagh's use of intertext within his writing. Influences from film, theatre and literature are discussed, which have inspired McDonagh's use of violence and dialect in these plays. The *Playboy of the Western World* by J.M. Synge is singled out for its importance as a literary and cultural foundation for two plays in *The Leenane Trilogy*.

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INTRODUCTION: The Manipulator

> I know Ireland very well. I've many friends there. I love that Country and I admire its people. I trust them. They respect the truth and they have a sense of humour. I think their policemen are wonderful.
>
> Stanley to McCann in Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party* (42)

Raymond Chandler, the well-known American mystery novelist and screen writer once wrote of the mystery story that the investigation itself must be an adventure worth reading and that it must baffle a reasonably intelligent reader (63). I would like to consider myself at least reasonably intelligent; however, over the past year and a half of preparing this thesis, I have to admit that Martin McDonagh, a great fan of Raymond Chandler, continues to remain a mystery to me. The only sure thing that I am able to conclude would be that this "mystery" has been of his own orchestration. There is perhaps a difference in McDonagh as he presents himself to the public and McDonagh as I intend to read him. However, since he firmly refuses to do television interviews and no major critical analysis of his work that I am aware of exists, his print interviews, plays and rare correspondence have had to serve in constructing my understanding of this intriguing writer.

McDonagh has been very careful in the way he has presented himself and his work during interviews and has even gone to the lengths of purposely drawing attention to himself, "... at first I wanted to get my plays noticed. So I acted up a bit during a few interviews because I didn't think people would

be interested in seeing them otherwise. So people thought I was this arrogant bastard"(McKeone 7).

Though McDonagh's reputation for mischief is contrasted by his reserved behavior in interviews, the now infamous incident of telling Sean Connery to "fuck-off" continues to plague McDonagh as a predictable question during almost every interview. The story has often been blown out of proportion, and many of the reports are unable to get the location correct as to whether it was at The *Evening Standard* Awards, which is true, or the Laurence Olivier Awards, which is not. To simplify the story, I will say only that after winning his award for Most Promising New Playwright in 1996, when Sean Connery asked him to quiet down, McDonagh's newly acquired obnoxious persona and excessive alcohol consumption got the better of him. Garry Hynes, founder of the Druid Theatre Company, who has often been said to "have discovered" McDonagh said that, "[he]'s had an extraordinary amount of success and attention very early. I'm sure that much of what's going on is the shaking down period where he's coming to terms with that" (Lyman 18).

While McDonagh has earned such designations as a "Punk Pinter", "The New Playboy of the Western World" and "The Tarantino of Theatre," his work remains unique to his own definition of a theatrical milieu. "Theatre should not be a lecture. That's why it has been boring for so long ... bring

cinema into the theatre ... there should be a couple of guns in every play – that's what I say" (*Irish Tatler*, 134). This attitude has been criticized by the established theatre community in London; however, McDonagh's plays were not created for them, but rather for "the bored, the excluded, the seekers of mainstream, "[let them] get a chance to occupy the stalls and galleries" (134). One of the most common accusations by McDonagh's critics has been that he ruthlessly manipulates his characters and his audiences. Some writers would perhaps interpret this as a snub, however, the title of a manipulator was also given to one of McDonagh's favorite artists, Orson Welles. In fact, Welles was called a "manipulator of the masses" who "manipulated the audience's sense of time, keeping to real duration at the beginning of the show and then dramatically collapsing the action once the basic illusion was established" (Naremore 23). This same unexpected menace to his audiences is exactly what McDonagh has become famous for in *The Leenane Trilogy*. In a cinematic milieu, a sense of menace is often what audiences look for. The cinema, especially in the United States, has become the greatest influence for McDonagh in establishing his theatrical style. In addition, his Irish parentage and many trips to Ireland have contributed to its content.

I will establish that the intertextuality of literature and film is an important aspect of McDonagh's work. The concept of intertext has changed since Julia Kristeva first introduced the term in her article in *La Nouvelle*

Critique in 1968, and has now evolved into what David Cowart refers to in *Literary Symbiosis* as a postmodern phenomenon (5). In an article on intertextuality, Christopher Johnson defines its current definition as a product of the intersection of a whole corpus of texts, which may be broadly defined as our 'culture'"(71). In McDonagh's case, I will discuss his technique of using multiple texts as it pertains to the parodying and displacing of specific dramatic influences. Elements of J. M. Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World*, Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party*, Sam Shepard's, *True West*, Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, David Mamet's *American Buffalo* and even Shakespeare's *Hamlet* all surface in *The Trilogy*. The title of the second play in *The Trilogy, A Skull in Connemara,* comes right out of a line from Lucky's speech in Samuel Beckett's, *Waiting for Godot*, while "*The Lonesome West*," the third play in the *Leenane Trilogy*, comes from a line in Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World*.

Above all, it is *The Playboy of the Western World* with which McDonagh's work has been especially associated. Some critics have even called his plays re-writes of Synge's play. I will demonstrate, that while McDonagh's work has obvious traces of Synge's play, his influences are not only restricted to stage drama, a medium which he "[n]ever ... dreamt of writing for" (Gorman). His affinity for filmmakers, rather, such as Orson Welles, Martin Scorsese and Quentin Tarantino has been established in many interviews with

McDonagh. The agitation and anxiety these filmmakers incorporate into their films are effects also sought after by McDonagh. Each play in *The Leenane Trilogy* moves along at a similarly brutal pace provoking audiences by including the graphically violent images seen in film.

McDonagh may argue that dramatic influences do not fit into his method of writing, "I'm a story-teller, I believe in making things up ... [I] don't put as much thought into the writing as they do into the critical study of it"(*Irish Tatler*, 134). Marion McKeone goes on to say that he has little knowledge of great Irish playwrights. Furthermore, Mick Lally, one of the founding members of the Druid and an actor in the original production of *Skull*, says "At first he was being compared with Synge, he barely knew who Synge was ... comparisons are inevitable, but he's an original"(McKeone 5). While all argue in favour of McDonagh's originality, I will reveal that while many influences are obvious in his work, McDonagh is indeed unique in his style and execution of writing for the Theatre.

McDonagh has often mentioned a book he borrowed from his brother John, *A Writers and Artists Handbook*, which, like Michael Straczynski's *The Complete Book of Scriptwriting* is a "how to" manual on entertainment writing. Though there is little doubt that McDonagh's talent reaches far beyond even what most critics have said about his work, I might conjecture that a book such as this was perhaps one of the first influences that laid the ground work

for his ideas of theatre. It contains chapters on Television, Radio, Motion Pictures and The Stage Play, all media in which McDonagh has attempted to write. McDonagh said that "only when he had failed at scripts for film, television and radio dramas, theatre happened to be [the next] chapter" (Lyman 18). The basics of a book like this, refers to theatre as a medium where "we do not ... see a wide variety of special effects, or death defying stunts ... We go to see a group of actors defining and exploring the human condition"(Straczynski 210). This psychological exploration is, in fact, the exact reason why McDonagh detests the theatre. In his theatre, "you're not under pressure to have your life changed by the performance" (*Irish Tatler* 134). The influence of a book such as this one has not been all-negative, however. For instance, Straczynski's book refers to the importance of location and basic structure to which McDonagh also adheres. The mention of Alan Ayckbourn's *Norman Conquests* and its three-play structure, which is so unique in its whole yet separate treatment of one location, has become a structure which McDonagh has obviously used in his two sets of trilogies, *The Leenane Trilogy* and the, as yet to be fully produced, *Aran Islands Trilogy*, which includes *The Cripple of Inishmaan*. I do not want to dwell on the significance of such a reference, for I believe that McDonagh has far surpassed its simple definition of the stage play, however, it is important for its initial impact of the structure of McDonagh's work.

McDonagh was born in London, and spent many of his summers in Ireland with his Irish parents who had emigrated from the west of Ireland in the sixties. He quit school at the age of sixteen, and after spending time on the dole and working at a government job, he finally decided to try writing. In fact the person who inadvertently got him into writing can be said to be one of McDonagh's greatest influences -- his brother John. McDonagh called him the "literary one" (Lyman 18) and borrowed many of his books to get started on what seemed like "the coolest kind of job there is"(18).

While often criticized for his distorted view of Ireland, and has been referred to as a "nomadic hybrid"(*Irish Tatler*), his critical distancing has enabled him to have a fresh perspective of life in Ireland; that of a well-informed outsider looking in. McDonagh belongs not to the category of 'classic' writers, but rather to the new generation of playwrights who have emerged to deconstruct and reveal a different side of Ireland. Younger playwrights such as Marina Carr, Conor McPhearson, and Martin McDonagh have broken the affirmations of the romantic Irish archetypes as set forth by Yeats, Lady Gregory and Synge in establishing the Irish Literary Revival. McDonagh, especially, has removed the sentimentality present in even second-wave Irish writers such as Brian Friel, Frank McGuiness and J.B. Keane in order to de-mystify previous interpretations of Irish culture. Declan Kiberd writes that if it were not for the revival, people outside of Ireland would have

no idea what the country was like; that Ireland is in a sense is a literary construction. McDonagh, then, with his outside perspective of being Irish but growing up in London, has stepped in to use the modernist structure of Irish plays in his own texts, while deconstructing their significance as Irish Nationalist classics. This effort at demythologizing, however, has begun to turn in on itself for McDonagh because of the commercial success of *The Leenane Trilogy*. For example, the popularity of *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* is garnering McDonagh the reputation of becoming the next Friel, another dramatist who re-invents the Irish on stage. Yet, while Friel continues to re-examine earlier literary traditions, McDonagh attempts to further de-stabilize them.

In three years, McDonagh's plays have gone from being ignored to revered. After being rejected by companies all over England and Ireland, (including The Abbey), in 1995, Garry Hynes, Artistic Director of the Druid Theatre in Galway, found two of McDonagh unsolicited scripts on her desk: *A Skull in Connemara* and *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*. By February 1996, *The Beauty Queen* premiered at the opening of the New Town Hall Theatre in Galway and subsequently moved to the Royal Court Theatre in London, by the end of the month. This effort won McDonagh, at the age of twenty-six, an *Evening Standard* Award as well as a Critic's Circle Theatre Award in 1996 for Most Promising New Playwright. McDonagh then went on to complete a

third play for the Druid, *The Lonesome West*, and by June 1997, the completed *Leenane Trilogy* premiered at the New Town Hall Theatre, then moved again to the Royal Court. That same summer, another of his plays, *The Cripple of Inishman*, directed by Nicholas Hytner, was also playing at The National Theatre, where McDonagh had also become a writer in residence. McDonagh now had the remarkable achievement of having four plays running simultaneously on London's West End. In October, *The Trilogy* had become such a success that it was remounted at the Dublin Theatre Festival to sold-out houses.

It was at this time that I was taking a course in contemporary Irish Theatre with Professor James DeFelice at the University of Alberta. We were asked to present a seminar on a new playwright, and I have to admit that I chose Martin McDonagh, not because I had heard of what a success he had become abroad, but because I liked the sound of his name. After reading *The Leenane Trilogy* and the first of his *Aran Islands Trilogy* (*Cripple*), I was hooked.

I initially attempted to contact Mr. McDonagh in the fall of 1997 to inform him of my interest in directing my thesis towards his work. In December 1997, I received the following letter:

Dec 27, 97.

Dear Kyna,

Thanks for the teen beat fan letter. I'm off out of the country for three or four months from New years day on, following the plays to Sydney and New York, so I don't know exactly where I'll be to speak about the plays et al, not that I believe in speaking about the plays et al at all, but anyway, drop me a line in March or April and I'll answer whatever I can. Yeah, check out Leenane if you can; there isn't a lot to do there but it's a beautiful place if you get the right weather...Cycling around Ireland sounds pretty cool, it's something I always fancied myself. Orson Welles did it when he was 16 or 17, and it didn't do him any harm. Anyways, take care, thanks again and try to catch the plays in New York if you can.

All the best, Martin McDonagh

Little did I know that in those three or four months, everything would have changed, and Martin McDonagh would become the most successful new playwright to emerge in years. After a sensational review by Ben Brantley of the *New York Times*, The Druid production of *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* off-Broadway sold out in six weeks at the Atlantic Theatre and was subsequently moved to Broadway where it played until March 1999. Without taking away from McDonagh's very real talent, Brantley's opening lines: "Sometimes you don't even know what you've been craving until the real thing comes along," certainly helped to ensure the plays' success with the fickle New York Theatre

audiences. *The Cripple of Inishmaan* also received a second production in New York in an off-Broadway production directed by Jerry Zaks to good but not as glowing reviews. In April 1998, *Beauty Queen* received six Tony nominations and by June had won four. Garry Hynes became the first woman to receive the award for Best Director, Marie Mullen and Anna Manahan picked Best Actress and Best Featured Actress respectively, while Tom Murphy won for Best Featured Actor, succeeding Brían F. O'Byrne who was also nominated in this category.

Since arriving in New York, McDonagh has been thrust into a position that even he was not expecting at this stage in his life. I had the opportunity to hear from Mr. McDonagh again this past February 1999. He mentioned Canada's premiere of *Beauty* at the Canadian Stage Company and *The Lonesome West*'s move to Broadway in April 1999. He took most of the latter part of 1998 off and is currently working on a new movie script. I have had a fascinating experience unraveling the mysteries of this writer and I am very grateful that he has supported the thesis with his letters of encouragement despite the fact that he preferred not to go into detail about his own work.

The *Leenane Trilogy* consists of *The Beauty Queen of Leenane, A Skull in Connemara* and *The Lonesome West*. While the plays can exist independently of each other, together they offer a fully distorted slice of community life in McDonagh's fictional Leenane. The location of each play takes place in and

around the town of Leenane, located in Connemara in County Galway in the west of Ireland. The specificity of location carries through in each of their titles, much like Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World*. Like Synge, McDonagh has been very specific in locating his plays not only geographically, but also historically in the genre of Irish literature. McDonagh attempts to show that while this area has become a source of literary and scenic inspiration for those who visit, it is much more different for those who happen to live there. Though McDonagh's Leenane is portrayed as a miserable murderous community, Marie Mullen, who has played Maureen in *Beauty Queen* for the better part of its production history, ensures that "The real Leenane, in Connemara, County Galway is not at all like it is in the play. It's a beautiful town"(Tony Awards Online 3). This fictional town is an invention created by McDonagh to parody the ideal image of the West. He has purposefully played with conventions of writers presenting the Irish as pleasantly poor folks whose only option is to remain strong in the face of continued oppression. He goes on to incorporate a dialect which he has invented to establish how the "peasants" speak in the west of Ireland. This approach, however, has attracted some criticism for his "synthetic"(Taylor in Lyman 18) portrayals of an Ireland where he has never lived except during summer vacations with his family. "There is something creepy about the Martin McDonagh phenomenon ... [he] was reared and still lives in London,

yet churns out plays in a half-invented rural Ireland" (18). However, this distance has allowed him to stand back and deliver a depiction of Ireland, which until recently, few "pure" Irish writers have been willing to portray. Garry Hynes says of his writing, "I don't think he could have written the *Trilogy* if he had grown up in Connemara. He needed the distance" (McKeone 5). McDonagh goes on to say that "two attempts to write plays about England haven't succeeded so well, because [he] wasn't afforded the necessary element of detachment which allows room for [his] imagination to take over"(5).

While his work about Ireland continues to receive accolades and criticism, little is mentioned about his success as a radio playwright. Though the story of the BBC rejecting 22 of his radio plays is cited in many of his interviews, the fact that he won a bronze medal at the International Radio Festival of New York in late 1994 for his Radio play, *The Tale of the Wolf and the Woodcutter*, is not. This work as a radio writer has emphasized McDonagh's strong framework in establishing story and style. The reviews for this play which parodies the Little Red Riding Hood fairy tale, from the Wolf's perspective, have actually foreshadowed his success in playwriting:

> Martin McDonagh is a funny guy. Here he has a funny premise, funny characters and some very funny dialogue but he has something more as well. He has the ability to wrench the comedy around just when you

least expect it, and take things down a sinister route which will tend to stay in your head long after the gags have faded away. (IRDP)

By incorporating these ideas into the visceral medium of the stage, this "hybrid manipulator" has become one of the most exciting playwrights of my generation.

CHAPTER 1: Into the West

The Beauty Queen of Leenane

> The image of a crime presented in the requisite theatrical conditions is something infinitely more terrible for the spirit than that same crime when actually committed.
>
> Antonin Artaud

The Beauty Queen of Leenane has become Martin McDonagh's most successful play to date. Since its premiere at the New Town Hall Theatre in Galway in February 1996, it has been translated into at least five languages. (See Appendix 1 for production history). After moving to Broadway in April 1998 and subsequently winning four Tony Awards, *Beauty* has become the new "it" play for theatres across Europe and the United States. Its darkly comic story combined with its precise and simple dramaturgical technique has made it the favorite of the plays in *The Trilogy*. Garry Hynes purposefully chose to produce *Beauty* before *A Skull in Connemara*, though it was called a "bold" choice to open the New Town Hall Theatre. Yet, from the first preview, Hynes said, "she could feel the spectator's response to Mr. McDonagh's study of the destructive symbiosis of a middle aged woman and her demanding mother" (Nightingale 29).

In the play, Maureen lives with her mother Mag in a small cottage outside of Leenane. She endures her mother's demands and exists day to day

by taking care of her mother and a flock of rain-soaked hens. When Pato, an old schoolmate, returns from England, Maureen finds hope and attempts to free herself from the responsibility of taking care of her mother. Mag, however, has no intention of losing the only daughter who is willing to take care of her and thwarts the attempts made by Pato toward wooing Maureen. Pato's brother, Ray, is the go-between messenger who must suffer Mag's company in his endeavors on behalf of his brother.

The play is chronologically the first in the *Trilogy*, though according to McDonagh it was written sometime after *A Skull in Connemara*. McDonagh says that this speed is an important aspect of his method of writing, "When you write at speed, you don't have time to hide anything. Stuff is going to come out which you don't even notice when you're writing, anything you believe in socially or politically will come through even if I try to avoid it as much as I can" (O'Shaughnessy 5). He has stated on many occasions that his work is not political, yet, this method of writing confirms that when one is writing about Ireland, it is difficult not to get caught up in the politics. Politics are in fact the "crux of the matter" which Maureen refers to at the beginning of the play. As she grieves for the loss of the Irish language in relation to the necessity of the English language, she turns off the radio with a Gaelic singer on, because Mag calls it nonsense:

MAUREEN. It isn't nonsense anyways. Isn't it Irish?

MAG. It sounds like nonsense to me. Why can't they just speak English like everybody?

MAUREEN. Why should they speak English?

MAG. To know what they are saying.

MAUREEN. What country are you living in?

MAG. Galway. (4)

Maureen goes on to say:

MAUREEN. If it wasn't for the English stealing our language, and our land, and our God-knows-what, wouldn't it be we wouldn't need to go over there begging for jobs and for handouts?

MAG. I suppose that's the crux of the matter. (5)

This "crux" implies that there is no way out of the contradictory pattern of existing in Ireland. Either you remain in the miserable post-colonial rural areas or you go abroad and long for Ireland; a paradox with which much Irish literature engages. While McDonagh's world is set up as a skewed reality on stage, beyond strict politics and conventional morality, this "crux" is a truth that cannot be dismissed in his theatrical world.

As mentioned earlier, McDonagh's work is often associated particularly with Synge's *Playboy of the Western World*. His parodic reflection on *Playboy* doubly displaces Synge's parody of Christy Mahon as the mythological warrior Cuchulain (Kiberd, *Synge* 109). McDonagh goes on to create a

postmodern deconstruction of Synge's modern representation of rural Ireland. While Synge depicted the peasants as folk fallen from the heroic past and reduced the gods to mortals (111), McDonagh depicts the folks in Leenane as a race of willfully ignorant villagers who "don't know the first thing about Irish history"(*Skull* 27). Unlike many of McDonagh's critics who have chided McDonagh for his connection to *Playboy*, Kiberd goes on to say of Synge that "he was free to use the [Cuchulain] story to his own devices, taking a point here, inverting a point there, as all writers must" (114).

In *Literary Symbiosis*, Cowart maintains that "deconstruction foregrounds universal intertextuality and makes possible the continued production of new art from the seemingly exhausted loins of old art" (26). While Synge constructed a theatrical story out of a "true story" he had heard during his time on the Aran Islands, McDonagh has constructed his on a parody of this "truth". Synge's modernist perceptions of mythology are further destroyed in McDonagh's banal postmodern re-workings of the same Irish mythology in its theatrical representation. Yeats aimed for the plays to match the Irish intellect as romantic and spiritual (Saddlemyer 278), while Synge wanted to represent the "truth" of the peasant folk. McDonagh, however, because of his claim of recognizing the limitations of the theatrical medium, has utilized it to destroy these ideals so that no "truth" remains.

With the help of Garry Hynes' staging, McDonagh's work has begun to enact instances of Artaud's theatre of cruelty where the actor-body must express the pain and violence which McDonagh's text describes. This hyper-naturalistic portrayal of violence is a major difference in Synge and McDonagh's work; for example in *Playboy*, the Christy's violence towards his father occurs off-stage.

There is an ominous tone to McDonagh's work, which like Pinter's, plays with audience reaction by leading them into a menacing unknown. McDonagh is a master of developing stories that lead the audience through a maze of mystery. He introduces his characters with brazen sarcasm, creates a bit of intrigue about their activities, pretends to relieve his audiences of their fears and then runs at them from another just as lethal angle. Whenever an audience thinks they know what to expect, something new happens. His final crisis brings the audience to a level of high anxiety, which like Pinter's, keep them on the edge of their our seats. Synge did this in *Playboy* for his audiences in 1907, since never before had they seen such a "distorted" representation of the "Irish" portrayed on stage. However, unlike Pinter and Synge, McDonagh shows the violence to his audiences. In *The Trilogy* and, specifically *Beauty*, the audience is forced to watch such events as Mag pouring her urine down the sink and Maureen burning Mag's hand on the stove; horrific details which are repeatedly referred to before being seen. McDonagh makes us, as the

audience, experience the pain by showing these malicious actions to us as stage realism. He excels at the realistic creations of such scenes by treating them as "the primary condition of life." McDonagh's theatrical interpretation includes the illusion of pain toward the actors as well as the characters. In the initial rehearsal for *Beauty*, McDonagh wanted Marie Mullen (Maureen) to stand on Anna Manahan's (Mag) back, though she declared "I'm sorry, Martin, but nobody is going to stand on my spine"(Marks B1). Garry Hynes' direction, however, makes what is happening seem real. Such mimetic representations often leave audiences in a state of heightened anxiety.

In *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*, the audience is made aware of Mag Folan's shrivelled and scarred hand as soon as we see her. Though she accuses Maureen of pouring hot oil over her hand in front of Pato, Maureen blames it on her senility and professes that she dumped it on herself when she was trying to make chips. However, we later find out that Maureen, in fact, does cause the scarring when Mag reveals she has destroyed Mick's letter.

> MAUREEN *slowly and deliberately takes her mother's shrivelled hand, holds it down on the burning range, and starts slowly pouring some of the hot oil over it, as* Mag *screams in pain and terror.*
>
> MAUREEN. Where is the letter?
>
> MAG. (*Through screams*) I did burn it! I'm sorry, Maureen!
>
> MAUREEN. What did the letter say? MAG *is screaming so much that she*

can't answer. MAUREEN *stops pouring the oil and releases the hand, which Mag clutches to herself, doubled up.* (47)

This invasive use of grotesque cruelty leads McDonagh's audiences to scream in terror at this scene. I heard many cries of alarm during the Seattle Repertory Theatre's production in February 1999. Even popular talk-show host, Rosie O'Donnell admitted to screaming "NO!" when Maureen goes for the oil, during an interview with Broadway cast of *Beauty* on her show. This uninhibited reaction to realism vs. artifice is one of McDonagh's favourite experiences in the theatre.

> There are times when people in the audiences are hit with bits of stuff flying off the stage ... I love to be in the theatre to watch that. The people in the audience jump out of their skins. I don't know why I love it. I think it's a power thing, really. (Lyman 19)

Quentin Tarantino, one of McDonagh's favourite filmmakers, admits something very similar about people watching his movies:

> I like movies that mix things up. My favourite sheer cinematic sequences in *Pulp Fiction*, like the OD sequence, play like, Oh my God, this is so fucking intense, all right; at the same time it's also funny. Half the audience is tittering, the other half is diving under their seat ... I get a kick out of doing that. There's realism and there's movie-movie-ness. I like them both. (Smith 34)

McDonagh plays with this idea of "heightened realism" in the theatre, by setting up the simple foreshadowing of Mag's scarred hand. Audiences know that something has happened, but they do not believe that the horrible deed will actually be shown.

> MAG. And the hot water too I do be scared of. Scared I may scould meself.
>
> MAUREEN *gives her a slight look.*
>
> MAG. I do be scared, Maureen. I be scared what if me hand shook and I was to pour it over me hand. And with you at Mary Pender's, then where would I be?
>
> MAUREEN. You're just a hypochondriac is what you are. (2)

Showing us Mag's fear and Maureen's hard-heartedness leaves McDonagh's audiences with the feeling that there is no room for mourning. After Mag burns the letter, we believe Maureen gets to Pato in time before he leaves.

> MAUREEN. *(to Mag who is sitting in the rocking chair)*...At the station I caught him, not five minutes to spare, thanks to you. Thanks to your oul interfering. But too late to be interfering you are now....Poor you. Poor selfish oul bitch. Kissed the face off me, he did when he saw me there. (50)

Maureen's deed is justified in the eyes of the audience when we discover Mag dead in the rocking chair from a blow to her head with the poker, at the end of

scene eight. Maureen gets away with the murder by saying that Mag died by falling down a rocky cliff. The audience becomes caught in a dilemma of deciding whether Mag's murder was justified under these harsh circumstances. We assume that Mag's death has freed Maureen of her miserable life in order to go away to America to be with Pato, yet McDonagh shows us that nothing is ever as it seems. On her way to leave, Pato's brother, Ray meets her.

RAY. I did have a letter from Pato the other day and he did ask me to come up.

MAUREEN. He did? What did he have to say?

RAY. He said sorry to hear about your mother and all, and his condolences he sent.

MAUREEN. Aye, aye, aye, and anything else, now?

RAY. That was the main gist of it, the message he said to pass onto you.

MAUREEN. It had no times or details, now?

RAY. Times or details? No...

MAUREEN. I suppose...

RAY. Oh, also he said he was sorry he didn't get to see you the night he left, there, he would've liked to've said goodbye. But if that was the way you wanted it, so be it...

MAUREEN. *(confused)* I did see him the night he left. At the station, there.

RAY. What station? Be taxicab Pato left. What are you thinking of?

MAUREEN. I don't know. (55-56)

Unlike Synge's Christy Mahon who gets to go off at the end of the play with out any terrible punishment, Maureen will become imprisoned in her mother's house, taking her place as a nasty and bitter old woman. McDonagh shows us that for the women in the west of Ireland, the "mythology" never changes. They have even less chance to overcome their wretched circumstances. This sad predicament is reinforced with Pegeen in *Playboy* as she laments Christy's departure. "Oh my grief, I've lost him surely. I've lost the only Playboy of the Western World"(111). Somewhat like Maureen, she must endure the miserable future set out before her.

In *Beauty*, McDonagh reinvents the traditions of Irish mythological storytelling with his use of letters which parody the three most important elements of the Irish narrative. From the fili poets' oral tradition, to the Christian monks' transcriptions, to the myths recognized today, Irish storytelling has remained one of the most important ideologies of the culture. This notion is symbolically paralleled in Pato's attempts to contact Maureen via Ray's message about a party, which could change the course of Maureen's

mundane life. The message is forgotten, however, because Mag deliberately forgets it:

> RAY. You'll be remembering the message to pass it on to that one?
>
> MAG. Aye.
>
> RAY. Say it back to me so.
>
> MAG. Say it back to you?
>
> RAY. Aye.
>
> MAG. (*long pause*) Me hip...?
>
> RAY. I should've fecking written it down in the first fecking place, I fecking knew! And save all this fecking time! *RAY grabs a piece of paper, sits at the table and writes the message out.* Talking with a loon! (11)

Once he leaves, however, the written text is then also destroyed:

> *As RAY's footsteps fade, MAG gets up, reads the message on the table, goes to the kitchen window and glances out, then finds a box of matches...lights the message, goes to the range with it burning and drops it inside. (12)*

This symbolic burning of the written word happens twice in the play and all that remains are Maureen's fantasies about going away running away with Pato to America. This parallels McDonagh's own satire of the lack of truth in Irish myth; all that is left are the fabricated folktales.

McDonagh's invented community is situated in Leenane, a real town in the West of Ireland. Thus "Leenane" exists "West" of center, out of the margins of civilized Ireland, like many of Synge's plays. The West, being the desolate area where Oliver Cromwell banished the Irish Catholics during his rule, remained one of the more primitive, unanglicized areas of Ireland. During the famine, this desolate area then became one of the last outposts before leaving Ireland for America.

The Druid Theatre, also located in the west of Ireland, has maintained a reputation for producing work, which reflects Ireland's national identity and history. From the beginning, Hynes has reiterated The Druid's role in its western Irish community. In fact, the first play of the first season of The Druid in 1975, was a highly acclaimed production of *The Playboy of the Western World*. Garry Hynes wrote the following in that programme:

> Theatre has for a long been regarded as a night-time fancy of the elite. I feel it must be a means of expression for the community in which it is rooted, serving its educational, recreational and creative needs ... Thus, we hope to be continually aware of and respond to, our social environment. (1)

Michael Etherton goes onto say that "one of the most significant achievements of The Druid is the way they have built up their audiences both in Galway and in remote areas" (85). This commitment to bringing theatre to the Irish

has been maintained in taking on *Beauty*. After its successful run in London, *The Trilogy* toured throughout the west of Ireland including Leenane. Hynes said of McDonagh, "He's Irish, but he's also a South London lad, tough and impatient with the past. He feels no need to kneel at his heritage's shrine"(Nightingale 29). In The Irish Times (on the web), Fintan O'Toole goes on to say that:

> If Martin McDonagh had not existed, Garry Hynes would have had to invent him, for all of this is uncannily in line with what she and the Druid have been about over the last 21 years...the trilogy is a culmination of a long demythologization of the West. At a profound level, McDonagh's plays represent a final reversal of romanticism. To the romantics, the West was proof of the Utopian belief that life was better and purer before the imposition of modern society, here, the West, without a functioning society proves the opposite. (24/6/97, 2)

McDonagh's fictional Leenane offers a postmodern deconstruction of this romanticism. Though Leenane is a real town in the west of Ireland, its "reality" is not important. McDonagh's locales are more backdrops for his stories than specific designations. In fact he says he chose Leenane because "it rhymed with the word Queen" – in Irish.[1] It is not the significance of Leenane, but rather of the "West".

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[1] Clarke, Pg. 1. Queen in Irish translates to banríon [baNreen].

During my trip to Ireland in the summer of 1998, I attempted a sort of pilgrimage to Leenane to see what was so special about this particular town. I wanted to explore the graveyard and the houses and hopefully talk with some people who lived there. Being on my bike, however, I was prevented by a rainstorm and I had to hitch a ride to Westport and watch Leenane shaded by rain from a car window. In retrospect, I am glad that I lost my chance to over-analyze the town as being the center of McDonagh's stories. I believe Richard E.T. White did this in his production of *Beauty* at the Seattle Repertory Theatre in February 1999. I had the opportunity to see the production after helping to research it, and noticed his same obsession with the locale that I had had a few months before. He too traveled there and included many photographs in the programme, which geographically located the play to his audiences, however, made it so specific as to hide the symbolic importance of the West as a marginalized location.

The marginalized "West," to which O'Toole refers, locates it at the margins of a 'civilized' Ireland but also of the rest of Europe. McDonagh's Leenane has been impoverished and isolated to the point where the community has had to invent itself on American violence, Australian soap operas and the effects of English colonialism. This grotesque representation of the peasants, which Synge first revealed, denies the idyllic notion of the Irish people which Yeats and Lady Gregory were trying to establish. In his article

"The Two Playboys," Hirsch refers to the peasants as "being used effectively in theatre because they already existed as myths in both the social, political, literary and cultural consciousness"(96). *Playboy*, to Synge's audiences represented Ireland as peopled by a murderous race of savages. McDonagh's characters are not so much savages, as they are terminally bored to the point of becoming sub-human because of their deep frustration with their mundane existences. They may slay their own family members, but we come to view this as a standard reaction in any community which has subsisted under the dehumanizing conditions of violence for centuries. This violence, whether it be from television, film or from their own backyard is what they were brought up, if not conditioned to do, by their stereotypically constructed society, with all it oppressive rules and regulations.

The two women in *Beauty* who live "up that oul hill" (9) are marginalized even further. McDonagh passes the traditional male story over to the women, making the men "impotent" and the women "weapon-bearers." The four characters, Mag, Maureen, Pato and Ray, re-tell the story of Synge's "getting even with da," in this representation of another 'absurd' fictional village. These are the women who embody the polarized literary ideals of women in Ireland: old "Mother Ireland" and the sacred young virgin. In *Beauty*, McDonagh parodies this ideal of Mother Ireland in Mag, a monstrous hag, while Maureen serves as the symbolic young virgin now

twenty years older and a bitter, middle-aged spinster. He shows how this violent society has impacted on Irish women, who as Kiberd says, "are schooled up to repress their instincts and are consumed by unappeased impulses" (*Inventing* 171) and valued only as family servants. This play is McDonagh's effort to show women inscribing their own painful entry into culture. By killing her Mother (Ireland), Maureen believes she is creating her own mythology, getting out of the place which has consumed her for so long. Particularly in the West, Ireland's fictional women have even less to live for, since it is only the men who are able to get out -- consider Brian Friel's *Philadelphia Here I Come*. Maureen's own experience of having once left Ireland, as Mag reveals to Pato, landed her in a "nut-house."

> MAUREEN. In England I was ... Over in Leeds I was, cleaning offices...A whole group of us, only them were all English. 'Ya oul backward Paddy fecking...The fecking pig's-backside face on ya.' The first time out of Connemara this was I'd been. 'Get back to that backward fecking pigsty of yours or whatever hole it was you drug yourself out of.'... And after that it all just got to me. (31)

All the women have to look forward to, is remaining in Ireland and continuing in their mothers' footsteps by following the traditions. This is a fate worse than death for Maureen who will sadly find that she cannot leave the tradition no matter what she does. By the end of the play, she will have

become her mother seated in the rocking chair. McDonagh's demystified portrayals of Ireland's idealized fictional women turn into images of tortured, betrayed individuals who suffer alone.

Another important image of women in *Playboy* horrified Synge's audiences when Christy's used the word "shift" in reference to a lady's slip, because it seemed too specific to a woman's actual body. Christy says, "It's Pegeen I'm seeking only, and what'd I care if you brought me a drift of chosen females, standing in their shifts itself" (106). McDonagh's awareness of the sexual repression typical of Ireland is satirized by prolonging Maureen's appearance in her slip the morning after she meets Pato at the party. She says to Pato, "You'll have to be putting that thing of yours in me again before too long is past, Pato. I do have a taste for it now" (28). Her sexual efforts further parodies Synge's own rendering of the Cuchulain myth of the "women thwarting Cuchulain in war by showing him their breasts. (Gregory 33). In *Beauty* however, the hero is later "emasculated" by the disclosure that he was impotent that night. This embarrassing detail is revealed in Pato's letter to Maureen:

> PATO. All it was, it has happened to me a couple of times before when a drink I've taken and was nothing to do with did I want to. I would have been honoured to be the first one you choose ... you seemed to think I did not want to be looking at you in your bra and slip there,

> when nothing could be further from the truth, because if the truth be told I could have looked at you in your bra and slip until the cows came home. I could never get my fill of looking at you in your bra and slip, and some day, God willing, I will be looking at you in your bra and slip again. (35)

This information about what really happened that evening, is later discovered by a malicious Mag as she reads the letter before burning it. McDonagh's de-mystification is then furthered in his use of the traditional Irish folk song, *The Spinning Wheel* as sung by Delia Murphy (Appendix 2), which fragments the myth of the young girl and her lover who are able to steal away from the grandmother to consummate their love. The "noiseless" maid who leaves the house in the song counters Maureen's careless excitement at bringing Pato home. She refers to it as "a creepy oul song" and then turns up the volume to cover up the "smooching sounds" between herself and Pato. This is the same song which Maureen's unseen sisters dedicate to their mother on her birthday. As it plays again at the end of the play, Maureen realizes she will never escape from the house in the West or the oppression of the society to which she belongs.

CHAPTER 2: Pogue Mahone[2]

A Skull in Connemara

... on the skull the skull the skull the skull in Connemara ...

Lucky in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (45)

Though *A Skull in Connemara* is chronologically the second play in *The Trilogy*, it was actually written earlier than *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*, and was one of the first plays that McDonagh wrote that he considered "good." It is important to consider McDonagh's claim of reading *Playboy of the Western World* after *Skull*, as the differences between it and *Beauty* are quite apparent in terms of references to *Playboy*. In *Skull*, McDonagh focuses not on Synge in particular but rather on deconstructing the whole theatrical tradition as he understands it. "They're the kind of plays I'd like to see, if I went to plays" (Lyman 19). While specific references can be traced to *Playboy* in *Beauty* and *The Lonesome West*, *A Skull in Connemara* lacks the same literary refinement of the conscious use of intertext with Synge . We are quite sure at the end of *Playboy*, *Beauty* and *Lonesome* of who has done what to whom; in *Skull* on the other hand, a more cryptic ending leaves more lose ends, including an unresolved murder. McDonagh says of *Skull*, "As soon as I started writing the first scene, I realized it was completely fresh for me and I wasn't harking back

[2] Translates from the Gaelic into "kiss my arse." McDonagh refers to Shane MacGowan and his Irish

to anything I had seen or read. I can see the similarities now – I read *Playboy*...at the time, though, I didn't know it at all"(O'Shaughnessy 1).

Garry Hynes found *A Skull in Connemara* on her desk when she returned as Artistic Director of the Druid in 1995, after a tenure at the Abbey Theatre: "I remember reading a manuscript; it was *A Skull in Connemara* and it was very clear before I reached the end of the first page that here was an extraordinary piece of dialogue"(Battersby 2). She called it, "a quirky tragic comedy," and immediately sought out this unknown writer. Though *Beauty* was eventually chosen by Hynes as the first of McDonagh's plays to be premiered by the Druid in February 1996, *Skull* went on to be presented with the rest of *The Trilogy* at the Town Hall Theatre in Galway, in June, 1997.

A Skull in Connemara revolves around Mick Dowd, a middle-aged widower, but also includes the characters Maryjohnny Rafferty, an elderly woman who spends much time at Mick's house freeloading, Mairtin Hanlon, her obnoxious grandson and his brother, Tom Hanlon, Leenane's lone policeman. These characters, who are also mentioned in the other two plays in *The Trilogy*, act out another gruesome scenario in Leenane. For seven years, there has been suspicion surrounding the death of Mick's wife, Oona, as to whether or not she died as a result of Mick's driving into a wall while drunk, or if Mick had first killed her with a scythe and then drove her into the wall to cover it up. He now has the job of digging up older graves in Leenane to

---

punk band, The Pogues as one of his influences. (*Punk*, McKeone, 6)

make room in the cemetery for the many people who seem to be dying in Leenane. As the town finds out that Oona's is one of the graves to be dug up, rumors return about the cause of her death. This is an unmistakable metaphor for the mystery genre of going back to "dig up" the sins of the past. Mairtin has been given the job of helping Mick, while Tom Hanlon has the job of overseeing the unearthing of Oona's grave. As they finally reach the grave, Mick discovers that someone has been there before him and has stolen her remains.

In *Skull*, McDonagh continues to establish the total lack of moral and legal control in the town even with the presence of its policeman and priest. In fact, even these two have become opposing forces:

> TOM. *(To Mary)* What are you doing here?
>
> MARYJOHNNY. I was passing on me way from bingo.
>
> TOM. I thought I told Father Welsh to bar you from the bingo.
>
> MARYJOHNNY. You did but Father Welsh reinstated me to the bingo.
>
> TOM. So he countermanded official police orders, did he? (54)

Ever the blundering detective, Tom is unable to figure out the truth behind the murders in Leenane. Maureen Folan got off by saying her mother fell down a cliff, while Mick got off on "drunk driving." Tom therefore decides to invent the "truth" and frames Mick by stealing her remains and creates the evidence himself by carving a phoney crack in her skull. In McDonagh's plays, the

truths and assurances that modern theatre had attempted to unveil are removed. Instead in Leenane, the characters have become the vehicles used to portray McDonagh's corruption of the sacred Irish community, and as such mirror his belief in the corruption of the Theatre itself. His commitment to creating a more exciting experience for audiences has been a personal revolt against what he considers a boring medium:

> I saw a play in Ireland last year with really crap dialogue. Two men just talked the whole way through and nothing happened. So I am using two men in my next play and in the first five minutes something will happen. (McDonagh, *Irish Tatler* 162)

He goes on to say in *NYT Magazine* "I've figured out a way where it will appear that a cat is being blown up ... it isn't really, but the audience will believe that it is"(19).

Creating an intertext woven by various devices used in the portrayal of violence in film and television, McDonagh has engaged in a method of turning theatrical conventions upside down. His combined parody aspects of Irish, English and American cultures reflect McDonagh's influences; his Irish parentage, his South London boyhood and his admiration of American movies and television. McDonagh is also self-parodic in his work, with the result that he creates his own intratext[3] within *The Trilogy* itself. *The Trilogy* reveals the western Irish community three times through three different families whose

lives overlap into the other plays. Characters in one play refer to and often insult characters from another in *The Trilogy*. This technique is similar to Tarantino, who also overlaps his plots not only with influences from other films, but also of his own characters in *Pulp Fiction*:

> I very much believe in the idea of continuing characters ... "Three stories ... about one story," ... you feel like you've seen one story about a community of characters. (Smith 41)

The continuing figure in McDonagh's *Trilogy* is Father Welsh, though no one in Leenane can seem to remember his name. Father Welsh, the lone priest in town, seems to have lost his faith in God and the Church and is habitually tested when it comes to the people in Leenane. In *Skull*, Mick provokes Mairtin into asking Father Welsh where 'your thing' goes when you die.

> MICK. Don't they snip them off in the coffin and sell them to the tinkers as dog food.
>
> MAIRTIN. *(horrified)*. They do not!
>
> MICK. That's the trouble with young folk today, is they don't know the first thing about Irish history.
>
> MAIRTIN. That isn't true...I'll go up and ask oul Walsh, Welsh at the church so. He'd be the man to know.
>
> MICK. Go ahead so. (27)

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[3] Intratext as defined by Gerard Genétte is the intertextual overlapping a writer's own work (Cowart 3).

Mairtin ends up getting a 'back-fecking-hander' -- an action which pays tribute to Father Welsh as a moral force, however feeble he may be portrayed in the plays.

McDonagh's refusal to accommodate theatrical traditions shows how he breaks apart the conservative theatrical ideals. "I am coming from a film fan's perspective on theatre"(O'Shaughnessy 5). He is also coming to this first play from an interest in Raymond Chandler's mystery genre. Unlike in *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* and *The Lonesome West*, where the murders are carried out intentionally, in *Skull* McDonagh introduces a mystery, which leaves the audience to decide the truth for themselves. In his *Casual Notes on the Mystery Novel*, Chandler points out specific details, which need to be recognized when creating a mystery story. These include:

> The mystery story must be technically sound about methods of murder and detection ... It must be realistic as to character, setting and atmosphere ... it must have a sound story value apart from the mystery element. (Gardiner 63-4).

McDonagh's sleuth in *Skull* is the policeman, Tom Hanlon. As mentioned above, he turns to framing people in order to get an arrest, since the people in Leenane are always getting away with murder. His number one case was dismissed despite his efforts at investigation.

TOM. The only body I've ever seen was a fella in a block of flats the road to Shannon. The fattest bastard you've ever seen in your life. Tits like this. Sitting, no clothes, in his armchair. No clothes, now. Television still on. A heart attack, the doctor said. All well and good. He knows more than me. But I had meself a look in that fat man's fridge, now. A mighty fridge it was, six feet high. What was in there? A pot of jam and a lettuce. Eh? And nothing else. A pot of jam and a lettuce in the fridge of the fattest man you've ever seen in your life. Nothing suspicious about that? I pointed it out in my report to them, and they just laughed at me. And watching television stark naked too? Nothing suspicious in that? (30)

Not only does McDonagh incorporate these principles of the mystery genre into *Skull*, but he also incorporates the fear involved in the development of the mystery on the theatrical stage. Orson Welles did this in film by leaving audiences to meditate on the mystery of life, "to leave a feeling of emptiness and to question the solidity of the world and the truth" (Andrew 153), while McDonagh does this in theatre by imposing shattering consequences on his characters. To some extent, this is the Pinteresque quality for which McDonagh has been noted. McDonagh admits to "being a big fan of" Pinter's *The Birthday Party* and the repetitive and banal speech patterns it employs:

MEG. What time did you go out this morning, Petey?

PETEY. Same time as usual.

MEG. Was it dark?

PETEY. No, it was light.

MEG. But sometimes you go out in the morning and it's dark.

PETEY. That's in the winter.

MEG. Oh, in winter.

PETEY. Yes, it gets light later in winter.

MEG. Oh. (10)

In *Skull*, this speech pattern is directly paralleled:

MARYJOHNNY. Mick.

MICK. Maryjohnny.

MARYJOHNNY. Cold,

MICK. I suppose it's cold.

MARYJOHNNY. Cold, aye. It's turning.

MICK. Is it turning?

MARYJOHNNY. It is turning now, Mick. The summer is going.

MICK. It isn't going yet, or is it now?

MARYJOHNNY. The summer is going, Mick. (1)

In addition, McDonagh is attracted to Pinter's manipulation of impending chaos amid the appearance of order. In *The Birthday Party*, after Goldberg and McCann have been verbally torturing Stanley:

GOLDBERG. Well, Stanny boy, what do you say eh?

STANLEY. Ug-gughh....uh-gughhh....

MCCANN. What's your opinion, sir?

STANLEY. Caaahhh...caaahhh....

MCCANN. Mr. Webber! What's your opinion?

GOLDBERG. What do you say Stan? What do you think of the prospect?

... *PETEY enters* ...

GOLDBERG. Still the same old Stan. Come with us. Come on, boy.

PETEY. Where are you taking him? *(They turn. Silence.)*

GOLDBERG. We're taking him to Monty. (85)

Stanley then gets taken off-stage to be dealt with, without Petey knowing anything about what is going on. Likewise, McDonagh follows suit in a similar scene in *Skull*, when Maryjohnny inquires about what Mick does with the bones he exhumes.

MICK. What I do with the bones, both the priest and the guards have swore me to secrecy and bound by them I am...

MARY. Michael Dowd, if you do not answer, bound or not bound, I shall leave this devil-taken house and never darken its...!

MICK. ... I seal them in a bag and let them sink to the bottom of the lake and a string of prayers I say over them as I'm doing so. (13-14)

Mary's reaction is anxious because of Mick's initial statement that he "hit them with a hammer until they were dust and pegged them be the bucketload into the slurry"(13), which is what he in fact does do with them. Pato Dooly hints at this behavior in his letter to Ray in *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*, when he says "The [letter] to Mick Dowd can wait till he comes out of hospital. That must be an awful thing, almost drowning in silage"(36).

As mentioned, McDonagh lets us see what happens behind Pinter's closed doors. Not only does he show his spectators the details involved, but he also goes on to exaggerate them for effect. This postmodern contamination of theatrical conventions invites in a larger "cinematic" audience, who otherwise would not be willing to sit through a play. Tarantino refers to this in film as "using an audience's own subconscious preconceptions against them so they actually have a viewing experience" (Smith 42). In the modern theatre, while the cleansing act of killing an opposing force reveals the final action, McDonagh's theatre does just the opposite. His is not trying to cleanse, but rather to disrupt the audiences' level of comfort in the theatre. McDonagh transfers the built up anxiety from his characters to the members of the audience who must endure the rest of the story. While Pinter's menace is also pervasive for his audiences, it is the cinematic quality of displaying the images full-out which sets McDonagh apart. He seems to purposefully provoke his audiences with a little "drinking and driving and skull battering"(*Skull* 51)

and breaks the comfort level expected in an established theatrical environment.

With *Skull*, McDonagh had not yet begun his deconstruction of Synge's contribution to the stage, and instead concentrates on other famous theatrical moments. His title for a *Skull in Connemara* is a direct application of Lucky's speech in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and he also parodies the grave scene in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Cowart argues that literary symbiosis is an important instrument of postmodern aesthetics. McDonagh's distortion of other texts allows him to both play with and satirize them. With his affinity for film, he also incorporates what might be called a visceral reality onto the stage in order to make his works "new"(Cowart 3). If film can be said to be "larger than life," while theatre implies "real life" or, in Artaud's words, its double, then McDonagh employs his alliance with film to make his theatre a larger than life experience for his audience. Among his attempts to bring theatre back to the "masses" who would prefer to go to a movie, McDonagh distorts well-known theatrical moments in his construction of what the Theatre *should* represent.

In *Hamlet*, the Clown greets Hamlet at the cemetery digging a grave for Ophelia.

> HAMLET. How long will a man lie i' th' earth ere he rot?
>
> CLOWN. Faith, if 'a be not rotten before 'a die...'a will last you some eight year or nine year...Here's a skull now hath lien you i' th' earth

three and twenty years.

HAMLET. Whose was it?

CLOWN. A whoreson mad fellow's it was. Whose do you think it was?

HAMLET. Nay, I know not.

CLOWN. ...This same skull, sir, was, sir, Yorick's skull, the King's jester. (155)

Despite the grotesque quality, Shakespeare's scene contains a certain affirmation of the sacredness of human life. Whereas in *Skull*, death becomes as meaningless as the dirt which hides it.

MAIRTIN. Ay yi yi, look at that one. Who is he? (*Glances behind*) Daniel Faragher. Never heard of him.

MICK. I knew him to say hello to.

MAIRTIN. Would you recognize him?

MICK. Not from his bare skull, no, of course. Although he still has a lock of hair there, now. He looks like a big dolly. (24)

In the next scene, we discover what really happens to the dead once their remains have been unearthed, for McDonagh has his characters even deface a corpse.

MICK. This is the only lesson skulls be understanding. *He brings the mallet crashing down on the skull nearest to him, shattering it, spraying*

pieces all over the room. He won't be smiling no more. (43)

There are many metaphors which can be applied to the smashing of the bones. McDonagh has Mick destroy not only what is left of the people in Leenane, but also to demonstrate irreverence toward the head symbol so important to early Irish culture. Just as the people of Leenane have lost their belief in the spiritual salvation of the church, they are also losing their belief in other aspects of their culture which portrayed them as fierce and warrior-like. The smashing also represents McDonagh's destruction of the theatrical traditions which have represented these ideologies for so long. By breaking down the theatrical form he so detests, he is able to incorporate a self-conscious merger of that which he enjoys; namely cinema. In this milieu McDonagh is able to replace the "unreal" impression of stage violence with that of the "real" in film.

McDonagh does not simply import the mechanisms of film violence, but extends its effects on the audience into a theatrical space. In this environment, the visible violence breaks down the time-honored convention that theatre should not and (could not) show "real" violence on stage. In *Stages of Terror*, Anthony Kubiak says, "[the audience] forgets that theatre is the primary condition of life and that life is subsumed by the theatrical perception ... it is able to transmute what is actual, what is real, what is life back into "mere" representation"(162). Instead, McDonagh's violence

borrows from the two-dimensional reality of film, where violent representations can be followed through. His violence then becomes hyper-real because as he violates the staging, he violates the spectator's level of (inactive) comfort. McDonagh states, " ... not that I care that much about the violence. It has to spring from somewhere; it has to come out of the characters themselves. If you are dealing with a violent character or one with an inclination towards violence, you can't cheat on that, you have to show it, you have to go all the way" (Carroll 35). This "all the way" attitude is similar to that of Tarantino's characters who must revert to torture and murder in order to fulfill their responsibilities as hit men or thieves. Audience reactions to the hyper-real on film, such as slicing the ear in *Reservoir Dogs* or stabbing the hypodermic syringe in *Pulp Fiction* may be exciting enough on film. However, when such acts are carried out on the stage, the effect is staggering. This exaggeration effect when translated to the theatre with McDonagh's smashing of the bones and demonstrations of torture, become excruciatingly sensational for a live audience. While it may be possible that audiences then remove themselves physically and/or emotionally from the play, when pieces of skull are flying into the audience, those who stay cannot escape the visceral experience. In *Skull*, we are then left with a riddle: Did Mick Dowd really kill his wife? The mystery must be unraveled through a series of horrible circumstances before the spectator realizes that they will not be given the

answer. After the bodies are exhumed and destroyed, and Mairtin is presumed to be dead, the audience could assume that Mick did indeed kill her. However, when Mairtin returns, we begin to question what at first seemed obvious. What is assumed to be "real" or "the truth", becomes buried with the rest of the bodies in Leenane. What the spectator assumes to be "real" in the story becomes "unreal" by Mairtin's return. Not even the policeman knows the truth anymore as Mick's confession goes up into flames before our eyes.

> MAIRTIN. A pure drunk driving is all this was. What would Mick want to go malleting my poor brains for? Mick likes me an awful lot, don't you Mick?
>
> MICK. I do, Mairtin. Sure I think you're a great fella.
>
> MAIRTIN. See, Tom? Mick thinks I'm a great fella. *Behind* TOM*'s back,* MICK *picks up the confession and sets it alight. It slowly burns as Tom questions* MAIRTIN. (59)

McDonagh's attempts to deconstruct the "truth" and attract an audience outside of the theatrical community have seemed to be successful. During my travels to Galway City in the summer of 1998, I met a banker who told me, "I am not really interested in theatre, but I would like to see one of

those plays by Martin McDonagh."[4] McDonagh has found a way to reward his audiences with the experience of going to the theatre as something more exciting than often concluded by a non-theatre-going audience. His representation of the Irish as a race of hilarious grotesques seems to replace the vigor missing, (according to McDonagh) from theatre today.

In *Violent Mythos*, Whitmer discusses the idea that humans are innately violent and require external community structures to control them (1). However, if the community structures are encouraging the violence as in McDonagh's Leenane; as in Northern Ireland, where civil war has gone on for many years, we see the results. No one knows what to make of the truth anymore.

> MICK. And Maryjohnny? (*Pause*) I didn't touch her. I swear it. *MARY stands and stares at him a moment then exits. MICK looks at the rose locket then picks up the skull and stares at it for a while, feeling the forehead crack. He rubs the skull against his cheek trying to remember.* I swear it. (66)

This ending imposes a mystery onto the audience as to whether to believe Mick's story or not. Unlike *Beauty* and *Lonesome, A Skull in Connemara* takes the audiences into a place where even when given the facts they are unable to decide "the truth".

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[4] In a later discussion via e-mail, this banker, Robert Bree told me "With regard to your second piece of advice – go and see a play, I tried to go and see Martin McDonagh's new play "Lonesome West" but it's completely booked out since day 1.

CHAPTER 3: "We Shouldn't Laugh"

The Lonesome West

Oh, there's sainted glory this day in the lonesome west; and by the will of God I've got you a decent man...

Michael James in *Playboy of the Western World* (47)

In the third play of his *Trilogy*, *The Lonesome West*, Martin McDonagh carries on with his brutal representation of violence, interweaving it with J.M. Synge's *Playboy of the Western World*, Sam Shepard's *True West* and David Mamet's *American Buffalo*. Where Synge left off in *Playboy* in terms of violence for a 1907 audience, McDonagh follows by upping the ante with audiences today. By adapting his appreciation for the cinematic impact "real" violence with Synge's treatment of heroism in murder, McDonagh's *The Lonesome West* turns Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World* into a stage version of one of Martin Scorsese's films. McDonagh attempts to purposefully provoke a reaction from his audiences by satirizing Synge's inflammatory portrayal of the Irish peasant which left his 1907 audiences in a rage. I have already mentioned this occasion in *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*, but it also occurs in *Lonesome* where, like Shepard, McDonagh forces his audiences to linger uncomfortably in the unredeemed world of his characters.

In *The Lonesome West*, McDonagh's four new characters add to this portrayal of a macabre existence in the "West" now familiar to us from the

first two plays, *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* and *A Skull in Connemara*. The failed Catholic priest, Father Welsh who is mentioned in the former plays is finally introduced. He is desperately inadequate in his position as God's representative in this murderous village. Another set of Cain/Abel brothers, Coleman and Valene Connor, are also introduced. They are similar to the feuding duo, Lee and Austin, in Shepherd's *True West*, who value appliances more than their own lives. We also meet Girleen Kelleher, who with her feisty independence closely resembles *Playboy's* Pegeen. Though McDonagh's characters resemble these aforementioned dramatic characters, the characters in *Lonesome* are McDonagh's own invented representatives of life in the west (of Ireland) -- modern parallels of their barbarian ancestors. He shows their violent outbursts as a natural element in Irish society, consciously mocking the romantic representation of rural Ireland by Yeats and Lady Gregory. As the audience continues to observe the eerie and dangerous relationship between Coleman and Valene, we too are thrust into this violent environment. Though the audience is never introduced to the father whose head was shot off "at point blank range"(8), we must remain in the theatre with the murderous Coleman, and endure his fearfully violent outbursts.

> COLEMAN. I don't take criticising from nobody. 'Me hair's like a drunken child's.' I'd only just combed my hair and there was nothing wrong with it! And I know well shooting your dad in the head is

against God, but there's some insults that can never be excused. (30)

This is an amusing justification to a very serious situation, yet in Raymond Chandler's notes on *The Art of Murder* he states, "It is not funny that a man should be killed, but it is sometimes funny that he should be killed for so little" (991).

In *The Trilogy*, the murders, suicides, and attempted murders in such a small town have everyone talking, but no one reacting. This is a town of people who regard themselves as Christians, yet repeatedly break almost every commandment. Even the sole priest in town questions Catholicism:

> WELSH. I'm a terrible priest, so I am.
>
> COLEMAN. Ah there be a lot worse priests that you, Father I'm sure. The only thing with you is you're a terror for the drink and you have doubts about Catholicism. Apart from that you're a fine priest you don't go abusing poor gasurs sure doesn't that give you a head start over half the priests in Ireland? (7)

Ridiculing the church is a common theme in *The Trilogy*, where McDonagh's own bias against the church begins to show through. Materialistic items such as Valene's collection of saint figurines satirize the superstitious beliefs within the Catholic religion. When he replaces his collection with porcelain saints after Coleman melts the plastic ones, Valene says "Forty-six figurines now. I'm sure to be getting into heaven with this many figurines in my house" (43).

To Coleman, however, the only thing good to come out of the church are the vol-au-vents[5] served at the many funeral receptions in Leenane. In fact, he calls them the Catholic Church's "best feature" (51).

In *The Lonesome West*, Coleman is shown to be even more "primitive" than Synge's Christy Mahon. He has deliberately gone through with killing his father while his brother, Valene (short for Valentine), ever the "Christian" with his collection of saint figurines, blackmails him for the inheritance. Coleman has managed to convince Father Welsh that his father's death had been an accident. However, Coleman is soon discredited when Father Welsh learns that Coleman did in fact kill his father.

> WELSH. Tell me, Coleman, tell me, please. Tell me you didn't shoot your dad there on purpose. Oh tell me, now...
>
> COLEMAN. Will you calm down, you? Of course I shot me dad on purpose. (29)

In frustration, Father Welsh immerses his hands in the bowl of hot melted figurines and runs out of their house.

> VALENE. Father Walsh, now...
>
> COLEMAN. Father Walsh, Father Welsh...
>
> WELSH. *Pulls his fist out of the bowl, smashes it on the floor and dashes out the front door screaming*. Me name's *Welsh*!!! (31)

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[5] A small pastry layered pie often filled with salmon.

Not only do the brothers not respect him or what he represents, they cannot even remember his name, proof that Father Welsh has no importance in this community.

Like Tom Hanlon, the only other civil authority in town, who commits suicide at the beginning of *The Lonesome West*, Father Welsh decides to take his own life rather than continue living in Leenane. He decides he would rather "rot in hell" than remain in a town where "God has no jurisdiction" (6). For audiences, this becomes an interesting reflection on a Catholic country, which cannot even pretend to sustain respect for the sanctity of life. McDonagh's constant imaging of the brutality of life in Leenane points toward the real violence in Northern Ireland and demystifies notions of a "picturesque" Ireland, just as Synge had done in 1907. By his unrelenting mix of verbal and physical violence with humour, McDonagh tries to shock his audiences out of any remaining respect for romantic Irish stereotypes.

McDonagh pushes his cast of characters beyond their realistic limits by presenting them as debased imitations of characters from ancient Celtic myths. His stories are postmodern retellings of the kinds of tales which rural Irish country-folk are supposed to pass on to the next generation. Like Synge, McDonagh's ability to tell stories is intended to reflect the importance of sustaining Irish culture through myth. Stories of battle and murder featuring distinguished Irish mythological heroes such as Cuchulain, exhibit the power

of their pre-colonial culture. In his retellings, he seems to be poking fun at the Irish and the notion that their mythology is all they have to create a pure Irish consciousness.

McDonagh has taken these myths and deconstructed their fictitious and romantic qualities. With Father Welsh, he makes reference to the polarized opinion of the Irish as either idyllic or barbaric in nature. Father Welsh says "...Jeez. I thought Leenane was a nice place when I first turned up here, but no. Turns out it's the murder capital of fecking Europe" (34). McDonagh then steps in to show his version of what Irish perceptions should represent by translating his knowledge of Celtic symbols in mythology.

In all of the plays, the deaths occur from a blow to the head. Like Christy's deed in *Playboy*, the deathblow to the head becomes the symbolic completion to one's personal battle against a so-called oppressive force. According to Celtic notions, "death did not occur until the cerebral membranes were destroyed"(Chevalier 477). The head became one of the most important symbols of triumph in war. The Celtic hero, Cuchulain, would proudly adorn his horse with the heads of his victims after entering into one of his well-known warp spasms before a battle (Ellis, 147).

> He closed one eye until it was no wider than the eye of a needle; he opened the other until it was as big as a wooden bowl. He beared his

teeth from jaw to ear, and he opened his mouth until his gullet was visible (Gantz 136).

The above passage has become a metaphor for the well-known Irish temper. Those at the mercy of this violent transformation are seen to have no hope of survival. This temper almost overcomes Christy in his confession to Pegeen:

PEGEEN: Not speaking the truth, is it? Would you have me knock the head of you with the bunt of the broom?

CHRISTY: Don't strike me. I killed my poor father, he was a dirty man, God forgive him, and he getting old and crusty, the way I couldn't put up with him at all. I just riz the loy and let fall the edge of it on the ridge of his skull. (24)

Christy soon learns to be proud of his accomplishment; however, Maureen in *Beauty*, Mick in *Skull*, and Coleman in *Lonsome* have gone from being proud to blasé about theirs. McDonagh shows his audience the conditions which warrant the final "spasm" of such brutal murders. We see the everyday violent bursts regarding anything from potato chips to stoves; outbursts which explain the brothers' offhand approach to committing to murder. After Father Welsh leaves in Scene 1, Valene says:

VALENE. Jeez eh! If he found out you blew the head off dad on purpose, he'd probably get three times as maudlin.

COLEMAN. He takes things too much to heart does that fella. (12)

In McDonagh's Leenane, the idea of murder is not heroic, but rather a reaction arising from an everyday violent environment now associated with Ireland and its wars of political and religious opposition. This is the Ireland we have become familiar with through the many films about Ireland whether by the Irish or Americans, which constantly portray the barbaric "violent Irish". Stereotypical films such as *Far and Away* with the fighting "Irish" Tom Cruise, and John Wayne's infamous fight scene in *The Quiet Man*, as well as films based on true events like *In the Name of the Father* and *The General*, each perpetuate the idea that the country is not only beautiful but also riddled with violence.

The parody in McDonagh's plays shows us that, unlike Synge's comparison of Christy to the heroic warrior Cuchulain, McDonagh's characters are simply murderers. His in-your-face approach to story-telling begins to explain the cinematic elements he attempts to bring into his theatre, leaving audiences to either enjoy the experience or to leave in disgust.

As I mentioned before, Synge spared his audiences the violence by keeping it off stage. In Synge's *Playboy* and *In the Shadow of the Glen*, audiences are subjected only to references to death. Yet, the allusions to Old Mahon's death, on both occasions, were enough to warrant the infamous riots. While protesting the portrayal of the Irish as violent, the Nationalists, outraged by such barbaric representations of the Irish people simply demonstrated their

own violence by initiating the riots. McDonagh, however, makes no simple allusions to this violence in *The Lonesome West*. This is no-holds-barred brutality destroying any protection which the fourth wall in the theatre is supposed to provide.

In *Theatre Audiences*, Susan Bennett observes that while theatre audiences affect the nature of performance, the barrier of the screen protects film audiences, thus shielding them from having to face the violence (75). It is also true that in film, the camera determines the spectator's gaze, while in theatre the spectator may choose what to watch. However, McDonagh's presentation of mimetic violence similar to cinema, provides little else for his audience members to focus on. We lose the comfort of an unrealistic screen, and are forced to experience the action as it physically happens before our eyes. While the audience is secure in knowing that film actors have stunt people or body doubles, on the stage they must come face to face with the actors as characters in front of them (Bennett 153).

In the initial productions of *The Trilogy* by the Druid Theatre, directed by Garry Hynes, the protection of the cinematic screen violence was lost in the 400 seat Town Hall Theatre in Galway. My own experience during the re-mount of *The Lonesome West* in The Druid's intimate seventy-five seat Chapel Lane Theatre in Galway in July 1998, proved to be slightly disturbing when the characters were beating each other up six inches from my feet in the front

row. I even had some Taytos land on my lap during one of the many brawls over potato chips. By the end of the play, the set seems to have been destroyed (Appendix 3), similar to what happens by the end of Shepard's *True West*. The incredible fight scenes between Coleman and Valene and Lee and Austin paralleled in *True West*, when:

> *LEE suddenly explodes and knocks the plate out of Austin's hand, toast goes flying, long frozen moment where it appears LEE might go all the way this time when AUSTIN breaks it by slowly lowering himself to his knees and begins gathering the scattered toast from the floor and stacking it back on the plate, LEE begins to circle AUSTIN in a slow, predatory way, crushing pieces of toast in his wake...AUSTIN keeps gather toast, even the crushed pieces* (49)

While in *The Lonesome West*, when Coleman admits to cutting off the ears of Valene's dog and shows them to him, a fight ensues which also involves an appliance:

> *COLEMAN jumps to his feet, points the gun down at the stove and fires, blowing the right-hand side apart. VALENE falls to his knees in horror, his face in his hands. COLEMAN cocks the gun again and blows the left-hand side apart also, then nonchalantly sits back down.* (65)

The only security given to me as an audience member during this scene which was tremendously disturbing, was to remember that as "real" as this seemed,

the experience was only an illusion of McDonagh's invented Ireland. The impact of this scene was certainly more visceral than anything I had ever experienced in theatre or film. Some audience members began to laugh after they found themselves screaming in response to the dramatized violence as a defence mechanism to their reactions invoked by the violence.

Unlike Synge's poetic reflection on the violence of the Celtic ancestry to reveal the "truths" of the Irish country folk spirit, McDonagh uses the violence for other purposes. "Theatre should not be a lecture. That's why it has been so boring for so long. There should be a couple of guns in every play – That's what I say! In case I am not learned enough, Raymond Chandler says it too"(*Irish Tattler* 124). This is not to say that Synge's plays were ever a lecture, after the riots he similarly responds to the Theatre "as we go to dinner, where the food we need is taken with pleasure and excitement" (*The Complete Plays*, 177). Their similar underlying philosophy of Theatre may explain why McDonagh, so against the traditions of theatre seems to appreciate Synge's work. In an interview in the *Irish Times*, McDonagh reveals, "I read *The Playboy of the Western World* and the darkness of the story amazed me. I thought it would be one of the classics that you read in order to have read, rather than to enjoy, but it was great" (O'Shaughnessy, 5).

McDonagh has gone on to incorporate the similar Irish dialects which set Synge's language so apart from his own contemporaries. At first read, the

language seems very similar. The use of the diminutive –een, for instance, which both McDonagh and Synge utilize is normally applied to anything insignificant, small or of little consequence (Kiberd, *Synge* 211). There is also a tone of contempt in this form which Kiberd quotes William Burke as being [in]adequately represented in English (211). Both Pegeen and Girleen have their names adapted to this diminutive ending, as the younger, lower-class women in town. Pegeen also changes Shawn Keogh's name to Shaneen as a reflection of his cowardness. This structure is consistent in all of the plays in *The Trilogy*, but is much more apparent in *Lonesome*, with words such as peneen, chaineen, feasteen, sniffeen, and brookeen. McDonagh's dialect, like Synge's, aids in depicting the characters as uncivilized peasants.

Like Synge, McDonagh uses the backdrop of the Irish countryside to portray rural Irish society as having escaped the imposed "refinements" of colonial influence in the more populous areas of Ireland. To Synge, this included the poetic lilt of the country speech previously unheard on the pre-Revolutionary stage. He spent time on the Aran Islands to re-learn the language and observe the purity of rural Irish culture in order to portray to audiences the "folk imagination of these fine people" (Synge 3). His introduction of these original voices "among the country people of Ireland" (3) were not given a welcome reception by the Irish Nationalists disgusted with Synge's representation of Irish peasantry when they were "trying to

portray a sturdy people ready for the responsibilities of self government"(Kiberd 168). In *Inventing Ireland*, Kiberd goes on to say that Synge translated the language not so much to the English spoken in rural Ireland, than on the peculiar brand of English spoken in *Gaeltacht* areas. This English is an instantaneous and literal translation from Irish (626), and while written in English, asserts Irish as the official language (624). Yet, McDonagh's manipulation of the language is defined in the following:

> I wanted to develop some kind of dialogue style as strange and heightened as [Pinter and Mamet], but twisted in some way so the influence wasn't obvious. And then I sort of remembered the ways my Uncles spoke back in Galway, the structure of their sentences. I didn't think of it as structure, just as a kind of rhythm in the speech. And that seemed an interesting way to go, to try to do something with that language that wouldn't be English or American. (O'Shaughnessy 5)

Thus, like Synge, after spending time in rural Ireland, McDonagh found rich material in the language and people. The language also lends itself to remain "pleasantly Irish" despite the brutal verbal abuse exchanged by most of the characters. By contrasting the coarse and violent content of the dialogue with what we perceive to be a quaint dialect, McDonagh tries to lead his audiences into losing their stereotypical impressions of the Irish people. Synge's

"musical" speech is then turned upside down, as are many of the stereotypical perceptions of the Irish people.

Though criticized for his invented impressions of Ireland, as he is not even fully Irish, McDonagh has emerged to de-construct the previous romanticized image of Synge and Yeats' Ireland. He has become one of the "new" Irish renaissance playwrights like Marina Carr and Colin McPhearson who have begun to question the established institutions of Irish culture. The fact that he tends to incorporate his love of film violence, however, shows us that no matter what medium he chooses to work in, McDonagh's Ireland remains a violent one.

CONCLUSION: "The McDonagh Effect"

Social Customs break down, next thing everybody's lying in the gutter.

Teach, David Mamet's *American Buffalo* (86)

Exploring *The Trilogy* over the past year and a half has been a remarkable experience. I have been to Ireland and Seattle and have been able to see two of the plays in *The Trilogy*. Yet, I feel like there is much more to say about McDonagh's body of work. Had I gone on to explore *The Cripple of Inishmaan*, I am sure that McDonagh's continued use of intertext would be revealed. For example, a new source, Robert Flaherty's film, *Man of Aran*, is brought into *Cripple* providing material for further study. Although two other plays have been completed in this next *Trilogy*; *The Banshees of Inisheer* and *The Lieutenant of Inishmore*, they have not been produced on the stage. Furthermore, if his other plays not based in Ireland; such as, *The Pillowman* or *Dead Day at Coney* were available, we could confirm that McDonagh's repertoire extends well beyond his preoccupation with Ireland.

The overwhelming success of *The Leenane Trilogy* to date, has been a measure of one of the most remarkable entries of a new playwright in my generation. Not only has McDonagh found a way to enter into the highly critical theatrical 'circles' in London and New York, but he has also remained true to his intent of creating theatre for the masses. North American

productions of his plays continue to deliver sell-out houses. *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*, especially, has forged a place in the Irish theatrical canon while sustaining its grass roots modesty from its origin with The Druid Theatre Company. This particular play has proven McDonagh's confidence in taking on not only potentially unsettling subject matter about Ireland's literary construction, but also of the role of women who must remain inside of it. It proves him to be a writer of great conviction who is masterful enough to de-mythologize the established literary and cultural traditions recognized in Ireland.

McDonagh's influences from great film directors such as Orson Welles, Martin Scorsese and Quentin Tarantino has proven him to be a renegade engineer who deals in violence and manipulation for the stage. McDonagh's well-crafted story lines layered with references to Synge, Pinter and Mamet, combined with the devices of graphic film violence bring the audience into an exciting theatrical world. His plays are accessible, yet subversive, and remain popular with many different types of audiences.

In *A Skull in Connemara*, McDonagh continues to make cinematic form take a three-dimensional shape by crushing bones before the audiences' eyes. The visceral experience of this play becomes overwhelming to the audience member who, like McDonagh, may think that theatre is boring. The violence combined with McDonaghs' raw satirical comedy lightens our sense of

morality and enables us to experience the play at its basic level of entertainment.

In *The Lonesome West*, we see McDonagh's manipulations of language and violence. He continues to break down the meaning of language as one of the major symbols in the Irish consciousness. He also goes on to ridicule the role and reputation of the Catholic Church. The irreverent portrayal of the Church's dominant ideology has become another means for McDonagh to deconstruct the myths associated with Ireland's religious culture. While he continues to label himself as non-political, his work offers a subversive portrayal of a de-mythologized Ireland.

As often mentioned, McDonagh has used his success in the theatre to allow him a foray into film. He was commissioned by producer, Scott Rudlin at Paramount Studios to write a film "A Sam Pekinpah sort of gorefest"(*Punk*, McKeone 7), and is currently completing another screenplay at the date of this thesis.[6] His success on Broadway has been overwhelming, earning him approximately $30,000 U.S. per week during the run of *Beauty* which he plans to use to produce his own film in the future (Lyman 19).

McDonagh has become a sort of icon for young playwrights, for being a writer to have come out of nowhere ("Nowhere Man" as O'Shaughnessy called him). After attempts at writing for television, screen and radio, when

[6] As told to me by a letter from McDonagh in February 1999.

McDonagh began writing for theatre, he had constructed his own understanding of the medium and began to put things on the stage that were no longer controlled by any rules. With the help of Garry Hynes and The Druid Theatre, he has continued to refine his style and has become one of the most interesting playwrights to emerge onto the world stage.

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APPENDIX 1

The Beauty Queen of Leenane
Production History

Galway: Druid Town Hall Theatre - February, 1996*

London: Royal Court - March, 1996*

Remount at Royal Court with *Trilogy* - June/July, 1997*

Sydney, Australia: Sydney Festival, with *Trilogy* - January 1998*

New York: Atlantic Theatre Company - February, 1998*

New York: Broadway, Walter Kerr Theatre - April 1998*

Denmark: - January, 1998

Germany: Munich Kammerspiele - March, 1998

Italy: Genoa - October, 1998

Spain: Villarroel Teatre - October, 1998

Seattle: Seattle Repertory Theatre - February, 1999

Houston: Ally Theatre - February, 1999

Washington D.C.: Studio Theatre - March, 1999

Toronto: Canadian Stage Company - September, 1999*

* Directed by Garry Hynes

APPENDIX 2

The Spinning Wheel
By John Francis Waller (1899)

Mellow the moonlight to shine is beginning
Close by the window young Eileen is spinning;
Bent o'er the fire her blind grandmother, sitting,
Is crooning, and moaning, and drowsily knitting: -
'Eileen, achara, I hear someone tapping.'
"Tis the ivy, dear mother, against the glass flapping."
'Eily, I surly hear somebody sighing,'
"Tis the sound, mother dear, of the summer wind dying.'
Merrily, cheerily, noiselessly whirring,
Swings the wheel, spins the wheel, while the foot's stirring;
Sprightly, and brightly and airily ringing
Thrills the sweet voice of the young maiden singing.

'What's that noise that I hear at the window, I wonder?'
"Tis the little birds chirping the holly bush under.'
'What makes you be shoving and moving your stool on,
And singing all wrong that old song of 'The Coolun'?'
There's a form at the casement the form of her true love
And he whispers, with face bent, "I'm waiting for you, love;
Get up on the stool, through the lattice step lightly,
We'll rove in the grove while the moon's shine brightly."
Merrily, cheerily, noiselessly whirring,
Swings the wheel, spins the wheel, while the foot's stirring;
Sprightly, and brightly and airily ringing
Thrills the sweet voice of the young maiden singing.

The maid shakes her head, on her lips lays her fingers,
Steals up from the seat longs to go, and yet lingers;
A frightened glance turns to her drowsy grandmother,
Puts one foot on the stool, spins the wheel with the other.
Lazily, easily, swings now the wheel round,
Slowly and lowly is heard now the reel's sound;
Noiseless and light to the lattice above her
The maid steps then leaps to the arms of her lover.
Slower and slower and slower the wheel swings;
Lower and lower and lower the reel rings;
Ere the reel and the wheel stopped their ringing and moving,
Through the grove the young lovers by moonlight are roving.

APPENDIX 3